

The French Revolution – A threat to the European Order?

As the 18th century drew to a close, France's costly involvement in the American Revolution, and extravagant spending by King Louis XVI (pictured) and his predecessor, had left the country on the brink of bankruptcy. Not only were the royal coffers depleted, but two decades of poor harvests, drought, cattle disease and skyrocketing bread prices had kindled unrest among peasants and the urban poor. Many expressed their desperation and resentment toward a regime that imposed heavy taxes – yet failed to provide any relief – by rioting, looting and striking.

In the autumn of 1786, Louis XVI's controller general, Charles Alexandre de Calonne, proposed a financial reform package that included a universal land tax from which the privileged classes would no longer be exempt. To garner support for these measures and forestall a growing aristocratic revolt, the king summoned the Estates-General – an assembly representing France's clergy, nobility and middle class – for the first time since 1614. The meeting was scheduled for May 5, 1789; in the meantime, delegates of the three estates from each locality would compile lists of grievances to present to the king.



Rise of the Third Estate

French society was divided into three estates, each with its own privileges and obligations, with the King at the top. The First Estate (the Catholic Church) and the Second Estate (the Nobility) had enormous privileges, including being exempted from many taxes, along with holding most of France's wealth and land. Since 1614 members of the Third Estate (including peasants, urban workers, and the middle classes) now represented 98 percent of the people but could still be outvoted by the other two bodies! In the lead-up to the May 5 meeting, the Third Estate began to mobilize support for equal representation and the abolishment of the noble veto—in other words, they wanted voting by head and not by status. While all of the orders shared a common desire for reform as well as a more representative form of government, the nobles in particular were very reluctant to give up the privileges they enjoyed under the traditional system.

Tennis Court Oath

By the time the Estates-General convened at Versailles, the highly public debate over its voting process had erupted into hostility between the three orders, eclipsing the original purpose of the meeting and the authority of the man who had convened it. On June 17, with talks over procedure stalled, the Third Estate met alone and formally adopted the title of National Assembly; three days later, they met in a nearby indoor tennis court and took the so-called Tennis Court Oath (*serment du jeu de paume*), vowing not to disperse until constitutional reform had been achieved.

The Bastille and the Great Fear

On June 12, as the National Assembly continued to meet at Versailles, fear and violence consumed the capital. Though enthusiastic about the recent breakdown of royal power, Parisians grew panicked as rumours circulated of the army intervening to overthrow the National Assembly. A popular rebellion culminated on July 14 when rioters stormed the Bastille fortress in an attempt to secure gunpowder and weapons; many consider this event, now commemorated in France as a national holiday, as the start of the French Revolution.

The wave of revolutionary fervour and widespread hysteria quickly swept the countryside. Revolting against years of exploitation, peasants looted and burned the homes of tax collectors, landlords and the elite. Known as the Great Fear (*la Grande peur*), the agrarian insurrection hastened the growing exodus of nobles from the country and inspired the National Constituent Assembly to abolish feudalism on August 4, 1789, signing what the historian Georges Lefebvre later called the “death certificate of the old order.”



French Revolution Turns Radical

In April 1792, the newly elected Legislative Assembly declared war on Austria and Prussia, where it believed that French émigrés were building counterrevolutionary alliances; it also hoped to spread its revolutionary ideals across Europe through warfare.

On the domestic front, meanwhile, the political crisis took a radical turn when a group of insurgents led by the extremist Jacobins attacked the royal residence in Paris and arrested the king on August 10, 1792. The following month, amid a wave of violence in which Parisian insurrectionists massacred hundreds of accused counterrevolutionaries, the Legislative Assembly was replaced by the National Convention, which proclaimed the abolition of the monarchy and the establishment of the French republic.

On January 21, 1793, it sent King Louis XVI, condemned to death for high treason and crimes against the state, to the guillotine; his wife Marie-Antoinette suffered the same fate nine months later.

Reign of Terror

Following the king's execution, war with various European powers and intense divisions within the National Convention ushered the French Revolution into its most violent and turbulent phase. In June 1793, the Jacobins seized control of the National Convention from the more moderate Girondins and instituted a series of radical measures, including the establishment of a new calendar and the eradication of Christianity. They also unleashed the bloody Reign of Terror (*la Terreur*), a 10-month period in which suspected enemies of the revolution were guillotined by the thousands. Many of the killings were carried out under orders from Robespierre, who dominated the draconian Committee of Public Safety until his own execution on July 28, 1794.

